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INDIVIDUALITY
OF
LINCOLN

By
BENJAMIN P. THOMAS





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THE INDIVIDUALITY OF LINCOLN

Benjamin P. Thomas

ANYONE who has read extensively of Lincoln's correspondence has been impressed by his quaint literary mannerisms and figures of speech, and by the individuality of his style in other respects. This individuality is evident in his earliest writings, but it became increasingly marked as years passed. Indeed, after say 1854, there is scarcely a letter of Lincoln's of any length that does not contain a droll sentence or an apt phrase or a clear and forceful statement of a proposition which stamps it as peculiarly Lincolnian. During the presidential period even endorsements, recommendations, orders and checks sometimes bear the mark of his genius for original expression.

Can one imagine any president other than Lincoln, for example, drawing a check payable to "colored man with one leg," or ordering a stay of execution by writing, "Colonel Mulligan: If you haven't shot Barney D..... yet—don't," or gladdening a young girl's heart by a terse endorsement to a Colonel to "Let John go home and marry Mary"?

Lincoln's usual reply to an autograph seeker—"You request my autograph. Well, here it is," or "here 'tis,"—could not be excelled for briefness and simplicity; at the same time it has

a touch of personality. This personal touch is also evident in his recommendations and testimonials, many of which could be recognized as his without the signature. He writes, for instance, "My old friend Henry Chew, the bearer of this, is in a strait for some furniture to commence housekeeping. If any person will furnish him with twenty-five dollars worth, and he does not pay for it by the first of January next, I will. A. Lincoln." Again he writes: ". . . we therefore recommend that you give the charge of it to Mr. Isaac S. Britton, a trustworthy man, and one whom the Lord made on purpose for such business." To a friendly physician who, having turned lawyer, writes to ask permission to use his name on a professional card but fails properly to identify himself, he replies: "I do not know whether you are Dr. Blades or not. If you are Dr. Blades, you may use my name; if you are not Dr. Blades, if Dr. Blades says you may use my name, you may do so."

While the distinctiveness of Lincoln's style is easily recognized, it is difficult to analyse. Sometimes he says a commonplace thing in an unusual way, as in concluding a letter, "We have generally in this County, Peace, Health and Plenty, and no News"; or in informing Orville H. Browning that "everybody is doing pretty much what everybody is always doing." Sometimes he reverses this process by stating a noteworthy fact casually, as in his letter to Samuel D. Marshall, of November 11, 1842, which he concludes with "Nothing new here, except my marrying, which to me, is matter of profound wonder." Frequently it is a sudden or peremptory ending—"What say you?" or "Let it be done"—which gives his words effectiveness. Again it is droll exaggeration—"Logan is worse beaten than any other man ever was since elections were invented." Often a homely simile or metaphor, or the unusual use of a word, gives a unique effect.

As Lincoln's style matures, one is increasingly impressed by the apparent spontaneity of his expressions. Furthermore, there is evident an increasing lack of restraint in the use of words, bespeaking a growing self-confidence. Lincoln does not hesitate to use a word in an unusual connotation; more and more he utilizes plain but pertinent figures of speech. Either he consciously mastered the art of seemingly effortless originality, or, more probably, he found that in the free play of his imagination and the spontaneous use of words as they suggested themselves lay the secret of originality and lucidity. Or perhaps these qualities, so evident in his style, were partly acquired, partly innate.

Doubtless the pressure of time and the necessity for quick, and consequently natural expression explains in some degree the direct, informal tone so characteristic of Lincoln's correspondence. This quality of frank informality is especially noticeable in his notes and endorsements to the members of his cabinet. On a packet of letters covering a particular case he asks: "What possible injury can this lad work upon the cause of this great Union? I say let him go." On the reverse side of a pass to a twelve-year-old boy he writes that "by the destruction of a bridge the boy has been unable to pass on this. Might it not be renewed for the little fellow?" He explains that he has commuted the sentence of an erring soldier from death to life imprisonment "not on any merit in the case, but because I am trying to evade the butchering business lately."

Particularly interesting are his endorsements to Stanton; for it is evident from their tone that for all of Stanton's irascibility there was pretty complete understanding between the two, and that Lincoln got considerable sly enjoyment from his relations with his choleric Secretary of War. One communication is "Submitted to the Secretary of War, for his education

and consolation." In another Stanton is informed that "On this day Mrs.———called upon me. She is the wife of Major ——of the regular army. She wants her husband made a brigadier-general. She is a saucy little woman and I think she will torment me till I have to do it." Again he writes: "Please have the adjutant general ascertain whether second Lieutenant of Company D, 2nd infantry, Alexander E. Drake, is entitled to promotion. His wife thinks he is. Please have this looked into."

Occasionally in his correspondence with Stanton there is a peremptory note. "Without an if or an and," he writes, "let Colonel Elliott W. Rice be made a Brigadier-General in the United States Army." "I personally," he informs Stanton, "wish Jacob Freese, of New Jersey, to be appointed colonel for a colored regiment, and this regardless of whether he can tell the exact shade of Julius Caesar's hair."

Lincoln's conception of the use of words is aptly illustrated by his reply to the public printer who criticised his use of the word "sugar-coated" in his first message to Congress. "Well, Defrees," said he, "if you think the time will ever come when the people will not understand what 'sugar-coated' means, I'll alter it; otherwise I think I'll let it go." From this it must not be assumed that Lincoln was careless in the use of words—far from it. But to him words were a means, not an end; and if a word conveyed the exact idea that he had in mind, he did not hesitate to use it in an unorthodox manner. For example, in summing up the military situation in August, 1863, he noted that the Father of Waters again went "unvexed" to the sea. Writing of legal matters, he said that the "push" by the plaintiff would be to prove that the bond sued on had been accepted; that having accepted a fee in a case to which he could not attend, he yet hated to "disgorge"; that a declaration which he

had drawn up for a client was as nearly right as he could make it before getting some "rubbing" by an adversary in court. He described his new-born baby to his friend Joshua F. Speed as very much like his eldest son Bob, but "rather of a longer order."

Occasionally in Lincoln's writings there is a charmingly characteristic description of himself. February 13, 1848, he wrote from Washington to Josephus Hewitt: "Your Whig representative from Mississippi, D. W. Tompkins, has just shown me a letter of yours to him. I am jealous because you did not write to me—perhaps you have forgotten me. Don't you remember a long black fellow who rode on horseback with you from Tremont to Springfield nearly ten years ago, swimming our horses over the Mackinaw on the trip? Well, I am that same fellow yet."

Such characterizations are consistently simple and unaffected. Having written an autobiographical sketch for Jesse Fell, of Bloomington, he apologized that "There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose that there is not much of me." On another occasion he described his life story as "the short and simple annals of the poor." He comforted James H. Hackett, an actor who, by allowing some confidential comments of the President's on Shakespearean plays to reach the newspapers, had brought down a storm of ridicule on Lincoln's head, by saying: "I have endured a great deal of ridicule without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness, not quite free from ridicule. I am used to it."

No less individualistic, although entirely different from writings of other sorts, are Lincoln's letters of condolence. These, in their simplicity and sincerity, speak from the depths of his heart. His letters to Mrs. Bixby and to the parents of Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth need only to be mentioned to be

remembered. Not so well known, but equally worthy of notice, are his letter to Miss Fanny McCollough and his letter of intercession for William Kellogg, Jr. The former was written to Miss McCollough, December 23, 1862, about two weeks after the death of her father near Coffeeville, Mississippi. It reads:

DEAR FANNY:

It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father; and, especially, that it is affecting your young heart beyond what is common in such cases. In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and to the young, it comes with bittered agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned ever to expect it. I am anxious to afford some alleviation of your present distress. Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You cannot now realize that you will ever feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than you have known before.

Please present my regards to your afflicted mother.

Your sincere friend,
A. LINCOLN.

William Kellogg, Jr., resigned from West Point under demerit which would have led to his dismissal. His father, a congressman from Canton, Illinois, renominated him to the Academy. General J. G. Totten, who was appointed to investigate the case, reported against Kellogg's reappointment. But in June, 1862, Lincoln wrote the following letter to the Secretary of War. His own son, Willie, had died four months before.

Herewith I return you the papers in relation to the proposed reappointment of William Kellogg, Jr., to a Cadetship. Upon Gen.

Totten's statement of the case I think it is natural that he should feel as he expresses himself. And yet the case comes upon me in the very strongest way to be painful to me. Hon. William Kellogg, the father, is not only a member of Congress from my state, but he is a personal friend of more than twenty years' standing, and of whom I had many personal kindnesses. This matter touches him very deeply—the feelings of a father for a child—as he thinks, all the future of his child. I can not be the instrument to crush his heart. According to strict rule he has the right to make the re-nomination. Let the appointment be made. It needs not to become a precedent. Hereafter let no resignation be accepted under demerit amounting to cause for dismissal, unless upon express stipulation in writing that the cadet resigning shall not be renominated. In this I mean no censure upon Gen. Totten; and although I have marked this “private” I am quite willing for him to see it.

With all his kindly sympathy, Lincoln was sometimes driven to distraction by the importunity of friends and office-seekers. But his manifestations of impatience often contain an underlying quality of humor which modulates their sarcasm and softens its sting. He wrote, for instance, to Governor Richard Yates and William Butler, old Illinois supporters and friends: “I fully appreciate General Pope's splendid achievements, with their invaluable results; but you must know that major generalships in the regular army are not as plenty as blackberries.” Of Jesse K. Dubois and O. M. Hatch, likewise old friends and political associates, he inquired: “What nation do you desire General Allen to be made quarter-master-general of? This nation already has a quarter-master-general.” And of a Southerner who deplored the hardships that his policy was working on the Southern loyalists he asked: “What would you do in my position? Would you drop the war where it is? Or would you prosecute it in the future with elder-stalk squirts charged with rose-water?”

Occasionally he gave full vent to his impatience; and at such times his words had a bite which was all the sharper because of its infrequency. His irritation at McClellan's repeated excuses for not pressing his advantage after the battle of Antietam finally manifested itself in a telegram of October 24: "I have just read your despatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?" And he obliged a colonel who, after the battle of Shiloh, made himself obnoxious by upbraiding Grant and Sherman and seeking his own promotion, by writing: "Today I verbally told Colonel Worthington that I did not think him fit for a colonel; and now, upon his *urgent* request, I put it in writing."

Speaking of his early studies, Lincoln said that he was never satisfied in handling a thought until he had "bounded it east, bounded it west, bounded it north and bounded it south." This characteristic mental process sometimes characterized his writings. It is evident, for instance, when he informs Seward: "I expect to maintain this contest until I am successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the Country forsake me." And it is strikingly evident in his famous letter to Horace Greeley in which he explained his policy toward the slavery and the Union:

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If

I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

Frequently the effectiveness of Lincoln's sober logic is enhanced by an epigrammatic sentence or a felicitous phrase whose obvious truth is overwhelming. For example: "I never knew a man who wished to be himself a slave. Consider if you know of any *good* thing, that no man desires for himself." Or, "Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wily agitator who induces him to desert?" He replies to a pro-slavery argument, "That the going many thousand miles, seizing a set of savages, bringing them here, and making slaves of them is a necessity imposed on us by them involves a species of logic to which my mind will scarcely assent."

But the chief charm of Lincoln's writings is in the quaint and homely figures of speech with which they abound. Derived from the rural environment of his youth, or from his efforts to convince the simple jurors of the old Eighth Circuit, or from his experiences on the stump before the country folk of Illinois—perhaps from all of them, this power of figurative language is the outstanding characteristic of Lincoln's literary style. Metaphors and similes seem to suggest themselves to him so readily that he probably did not realize how often he used them. And examples are so numerous that one has merely

to decide which ones to select. He informed a political supporter, for instance, that he was relying on him for a "fair shake" in his county. As the secession movement gained headway while he waited helplessly for inauguration day, he ordered his friends in Congress to entertain no proposition for compromise in regard to the extension of slavery, for the "tug" had to come, and it was better that it should come then rather than later. "This," he said, in forecasting the respective strength of Democrats, Republicans, and Know-Nothings in the election of 1856, "is as plain as the adding up of the weight of three small hogs."

Examples like these could be repeated almost indefinitely. When Orville H. Browning asked him if he was a candidate for the presidency he confessed, "The taste *is* in my mouth a little." In the campaign of 1848 he saw a happy augury in the fact that "all the odds and ends are with us." "Never," he informed Reverdy Johnson, in July, 1862, will he "surrender this game leaving any card unplayed." At the time of Douglas's quarrel with Buchanan, in 1858, he explained that some of Douglas's followers regretted that Douglas had not healed his breach with the President, and were beginning to believe that Douglas really wanted to have a "fuss." "That," wrote Lincoln, "sticks in their throats."

Herndon said: "In the matter of letter writing he could never distinguish between one of a business nature or any other kind. If a happy thought struck him he was by no means reluctant to use it." His great desire was to make himself understood in the quickest and easiest way. February 9, 1860, fearing that a factional fight might lose him the endorsement of the Illinois Republican Convention for the presidency, he wrote to Norman B. Judd, of Chicago: "Your discomfited assailants are most bitter against me; and they will, for revenge upon me,

lay to the Bates egg in the South, and to the Seward egg in the North, and go far toward squeezing me out in the middle with nothing. Can you not help me a little in this matter in your end of the vineyard?" Writing, later the same year, to Samuel Galloway, of Ohio, about the strategy to be used in the Republican National Convention, he said: "My name is new in the field and I suppose I am not the first choice of a very great many. Our policy, then, is to give no offense to others—leave them in a mood to come to us if they shall be compelled to give up their first love." Of President Taylor he wrote: "He must occasionally say, or seem to say, 'by the Eternal,' 'I take the responsibility.' Those phrases were the 'Samson's locks' of General Jackson, and we must not disregard the lessons of experience."

This knack of clarifying an idea by a vivid metaphor or simile was especially helpful to Lincoln in his correspondence with his generals and military advisers. During the war Lincoln became, of necessity, a close student of military matters. Visiting the War Department daily, studying the telegrams from the front, following the movements of every detachment of troops, occupying his leisure with examination of the latest military texts, he soon acquired a practical grasp of military strategy and tactics. But the picturesque imagery of his military language remained distinctively his own.

To him the navy suggested "Uncle Sam's web-feet," leaving their "tracks" on all the "watery margins." For harbor defense he advocated the use of steam rams whose duty "would be to guard a particular harbor as a bulldog guards his master's door." He deplored the dilatoriness of Meade who at Gettysburg let his noble army expend "all the skill, and toil and blood, up to the ripe harvest, and then let the crop go to waste." October 4, 1863, he telegraphed to General Rosecrans that as

long as he can hold Chattanooga he can “‘board at home’ so to speak,” and menace or attack the enemy constantly; and to Halleck he wired that “if he [Rosecrans] can only maintain this position, without more, this rebellion can only eke out a short and feeble existence, as an animal sometimes may with a thorn in its vitals.”

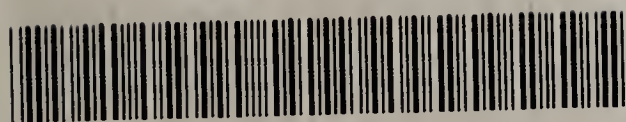
He continually thought of an army as an animal. In a telegram to General Hooker, June 5, 1863, he warned that if Lee should cross to the north side of the Rappahannock, leaving a force at Fredericksburg, Hooker had better remain on the north side also rather than risk a crossing to get at the force at Fredericksburg. “In one word,” he said, “I would not take any risk of being entangled upon the river, like an ox jumped half over a fence and liable to be torn by dogs front and rear without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other.” Five days later he informed Hooker that Lee’s army, not Richmond, should be his objective, that if Lee should come north he should follow him, if he should stay where he was he should “fret him and fret him.” Again on June 14, he telegraphed to Hooker: “If the head of Lee’s army is at Martinsburg and the tail of it on the plank road between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the animal must be very slim somewhere. Could you not break him?”

After Grant’s appointment as commander-in-chief, Lincoln’s military letters and telegrams became increasingly infrequent as his confidence in Grant grew. In August, 1864, however, Grant, temporarily checked at Petersburg, was tempted to send assistance to Sheridan who was hard pressed in the Shenandoah Valley. But he finally decided to stay where he was. Lincoln heartily approved his decision. August 17, he lapsed into characteristic rugged phraseology as he informed Grant: “I have seen your despatch expressing unwillingness to break your hold

where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bulldog grip and chew and choke as much as possible.”

Lincoln’s style was peculiarly and distinctively his own, as distinctively his own as his unique personality. And by reason of its simplicity, frankness and utter lack of restraint it reflects his personality to a remarkable degree—to such a degree, in fact, that while we can learn much about Lincoln by reading what has been written of him by others, we cannot claim really to know him until we have read what he himself wrote and said.

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